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## BECKETT OUT OF HIS MIND: THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

### INTRODUCTION

Playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter write in a context in which traditional narratives, or what Lyotard calls grand or meta-narrative (31–35), no longer inspire confidence, leaving society with a sense of alienation and loss. These dramatists were impelled by their historical and cultural contexts to explore the mind's reality through a medium that involved the physical embodiment of characters on stage, in spite of the absence of decisive meaning. As Martin Esslin has pointed out, going from the medium of language and a reliance on meaning or conceptuality in communication toward a concern with immediate experience belongs to a long tradition in the history of Western literature involving pantomime and the carnivalesque (328–29). This tradition focuses on the individual's basic circumstances rather than on the ideological makeup of his or her social identity. As portrayed in drama by Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg and in fiction by James Joyce, this tradition explores the reality of the mind and its direct contact with the phenomenal world prior to the interpretive strategies of any particular narrative. In other words, it deals with the fundamental experience of what it is like to be conscious of our existence. Esslin does not seem to be referring to the objects of awareness, or intentional mind, but to consciousness itself. Each play suggests this basic phenomenon, addressing, as Esslin puts it, the question, "How does this individual feel when confronted with the human condition?" (405).

If we assume that phenomenal consciousness is at the basis of this condition, then how does drama allow us to experience it? David Chalmers, in *The Conscious Mind*, explains:

We can say that a being is conscious if there is *something it is like* to be that being, to use a phrase made famous by Thomas Nagel. Similarly, a mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that mental state. To put it another way, we can say that a mental state is conscious

if it has a *qualitative feel*—an associated quality of experience ... or *qualia* for short. The problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities is just the problem of explaining consciousness. (4)

In its representation of what it is like to be someone, modern drama goes beyond qualia and approaches the foundation of human reality, the experience of consciousness as such. Chalmers in this passage does not make the distinction between mind—with its intentional content, such as qualia—and consciousness, which is devoid of content. Eastern philosophy emphasizes this distinction as well as that between higher states of awareness, such as the “pure consciousness event” (PCE). In this tradition, art and literature are said to have the suggestive power (*dhvani*) to shift awareness from the qualia, or content, of the mind toward a state of non-conceptuality—a shift much in evidence in contemporary drama. The qualia of experience are mediated by linguistic and historical factors, but out-of-the-ordinary or mystical states are beyond mediation in their lack of intentional objects. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, as I will demonstrate, refine the mediation of qualia to a point of abstraction at which awareness, if not altogether transcending mediation, verges on a PCE, or state of non-separateness. There are flavors of non-separateness, differences of historical residue, in non-intentional awareness, which in its purest form consists of a “flavorless flavor” (Franklin 234–5).

The devices Beckett uses to break through temporal, discursive barriers toward a transtemporal, transversal awareness are well known to theatre-goers, even though they may find the effects of these absurdist devices difficult to explain after the fact. By dispensing with narrative sequence, character development, and psychology in the conventional sense, Beckett portrays the process by which awareness moves from the qualia of a historically mediated experience to a state beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries. Beckett shows what it is like to be aware in a single moment, rather than drifting in the slipstream of culturally mediated discursive patterns of thought. The main device Beckett uses to express this intuitive moment is the poetic image. In *Waiting for Godot*, as in *Endgame*, the juxtaposition of a series of poetic images, which substitutes for a conventional plot, results for the audience in a series of epiphanies on the nature of conscious experience.

These poetic images and the flashes of non-ordinary, non-intentional consciousness they induce resemble the “total experience” or “feeling of wholeness” that results from the “polyphonic montage” in Sergei Eisenstein’s film theory (Andrew 61–63). The poetic image takes the conscious mind from the coherence

and rationality of a narrative sequence to a suggestion of the noumenal, or intuitive, realm beyond. By integrating these poles of experience—the concrete and the abstract, rational and intuitive, mediated and unmediated—Beckett's drama leads to a re-discovery of ultimate realities apparently beyond the grasp of the intentional mind alone. Therefore, he is less concerned with meaning than with the structure of experience. Through defamiliarization, his work can lead the spectator toward an appreciation of awareness by itself. This alienation effect—the ideal of Brecht, the Russian formalists, *The Natyashastra* in Indian aesthetics, Keats's negative capability, and the decontextualists—does not simply replace one set of mental contents for another, as poststructuralists would argue. Rather, it begins the process of emptying the awareness of all content by deconstructing the psychic structures that select, organize, interpret, and limit our knowledge about the world around us.

### WAITING FOR GODOT

The distinction between awareness and its content, between consciousness and mind, can help to explain the significance of Beckett's abandonment ordinary dramatic characterization based on conventional motives; Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* are nearly without attributes—aging tramps locked in a love/hate relationship and full of uncertainty about the time, place, and purpose of their existence. According to Beckett's aesthetic strategy, they reveal that access to a quality-less pure awareness, or even to a flavor of non-separateness, involves letting go of personal and social identities. W. T. Stace gives an apt description of pure awareness in what he calls "introverted mysticism":

Suppose that, after having got rid of all sensations, one should go on to exclude from consciousness all sensuous images, and then all abstract thoughts, reasoning processes, volitions, and other particular mental contents; what would there then be left of consciousness? There would be no mental content whatever but rather a complete emptiness, vacuum, void. One would suppose *a priori* that consciousness would then entirely lapse and one would fall asleep or become unconscious. But the introverted mystics—thousands of them all over the world—unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental contents, but that what then happens is quite different from a lapse into unconsciousness. On the contrary, what emerges is a state of *pure* consciousness—"pure" in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empiri-

cal content. It has no content except itself. (*Mysticism and Philosophy* 85–6)

In this mystical experience, as in more flavored states of non-separateness more likely for Beckett's audiences, awareness moves beyond the intentional mind's subject/object duality into states of greater stillness.

Malekin and Yarrow, in their book *Consciousness, Literature and Theatre*, explain that this state "is approached by the process of unknowing; that is to say, the mind becomes less, not more[,] active, eventually leaving the subject-object relationship behind. It exchanges knowing about things, in a theoretical and abstract way, for knowledge through uniting with the object of knowledge" (28). *Waiting for Godot* induces in the spectator/reader this process of unknowing. The characters cannot fathom their situations, and the spectators cannot grasp the play through any traditional narrative but must rely instead on their intuition, on letting go of knowledge-by-acquaintance. The fact that, in 1957, the prisoners in San Quentin, California, were famously enthralled by a performance of *Waiting for Godot* suggests the inadequacy of an authoritative, intellectual approach to its understanding.

From a thematic perspective, the metaphysical and practical uncertainties of Beckett's play, with its pseudo-climaxes and non-arrivals of Godot, do not inevitably render it nihilistic or entirely pessimistic. As Peter Brook says, "Beckett's dark plays are plays full of light" (65). Their uncertainties provide a vehicle for going beyond the clouds of conceptual boundaries to the light of freedom associated with non-intentional consciousness. In the play-within-the-play in Act II, the speculation on Godot's identity when Pozzo says, "Godin ... Godet ... Godot ... anyhow you see who I mean" (24), suggests that one's true identity is not exhausted by thought or language, which serves only to identify and report on the content of human experience. True identity may be glimpsed instantaneously as a "total experience" or a "feeling of the whole" associated with the poetic image, as suggested by Eisenstein and Indian literary theory. Godot never will be apprehended through cognition or represented fully through discursive language, which unfolds in time. As Beckett was well aware, any notion of an ultimate, non-changing reality can be rendered only through poetic suggestion and apprehended only intuitively—through aesthetic rapture—in an instant of time. The play thus alludes to a remote possibility of being saved by Godot, since no explicit rendering of what it means to be saved is possible. As Beckett dramatizes, the ultimate reality of the subjective mind is beyond the spatio-temporal limits of logical meaning.

Beckett is a master of the poetic image and other devices that stop the flow of thought and move the attention inward toward witnessing awareness. The features of the anti-play—the lack of logical movement, the digressions and non-sense, the fact that, as one critic says, “nothing happens, twice,” the repetition of endless cycles of action-in-non-action, and Vladimir’s circular song at the opening of Act II (“And dug the dog a tomb”)—have the effect, as Andrew Kennedy observes, of conveying a sense of “eternal return” (20, 24). This cyclical self-referral of the text also can be seen in the ironic reference to what is happening in the theatre, especially in Act II. The self-reflexiveness we see, as when Estragon says, “That wasn’t such a bad little canter” (42), or when Vladimir looks out into the audience and says, “There! Not a soul in sight” (47), or, later, when he asks, “What are we doing here, *that* is the question?” (51), creates conceptual gaps through which we can stand back and intuit the witnessing function of consciousness. Here, the semiotic gap between word and referent, or the self-referral of the text, induces a corresponding self-referral in the minds of the audience. This combined subjective and objective self-reflexiveness aesthetically highlights awareness over its content and may conjure up for the audience the flavor of oneness or non-separateness. Through a self-referral embodiment of the actors on stage, the drama of consciousness suggests and may even render present that which is rendered absent by the limitations of thought and language.

### BECOMING NON-ACTIVE

James Calderwood, in “Ways of Waiting in *Waiting for Godot*,” notes that waiting is a kind of non-activity, which is self-erasing (33). He means “self-erasing” in the sense of decentering the subject, exchanging one conventional identity for another in an endless series. But this non-activity also can empty out or erase the contents of the mind more radically, thereby promoting a non-active state of awareness altogether beyond social identity. Beckett’s non-activity reflects and also induces a tendency toward pure consciousness (*turiya*). The act of waiting, although indiscernible to an outside observer, disrupts the illusion of time by erasing the past, diminishing the present, and aggrandizing the future when that which is waited for is expected to appear (33). More fundamentally, though, the movement toward the appointment with Godot is a movement from activity to non-activity, “becoming” to “being,” that, in the drama, is really a non-movement in which nothing ever happens because being or emptiness is omnipresent. As pure witnessing awareness, it underlies all instantiations of social identity.

It is also the source of all activity. Estragon: "Let's go." Vladimir: "We can't." "Why not?" "We're waiting for Godot." In the emptiness of meaning, as Malekin and Yarrow point out, waiting is:

... the ever-repeated moment which precedes beginning. The moment in which beginning is possible; the moment, as at the beginning of the play, when performers and spectators are most awake to the newness of it all. *Godot* hauls its participants back again and again to this launching-place, from which, as in life, everything always has to be improvised anew. (139)

The moment that precedes this beginning corresponds to our sense of awareness as a unity, a beginning-less continuum beyond the flux of time, which we know simply by virtue of awareness itself. If this unity, as in waiting, can be rendered or mediated, then it is not by concepts or expectations but by the embodiment of the self-shining, witnessing awareness before which the drama unfolds. In the end, the play offers no other certainty.

From the perspective of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, activity is an illusion, and the one reality is the stasis of pure being (as in waiting), which is omnipresent and self-sufficient (Deutsch 32). The universality of waiting is suggested in part when Vladimir says, "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?" And Estragon replies, "Billions" (51). That is, everyone has the potential for this experience. If Vladimir and Estragon are unique, it is only because for them, as tramps, travel is an end in itself (Calderwood 35) and the destination (being) is immanent in the process of becoming. Calderwood refers to the paradox of the appointment as similar to the sound of one hand clapping (34). As a Zen koan, this statement has no rational meaning and serves as a vehicle for taking the attention beyond the limits of thought and meaning (in the non-dual state, there are not two hands), and, in so doing, it is a synecdoche for Beckett's play.

## GODOT

It has often been noted that the word "Godot" is a Joycean word with hidden shapes. Reversed, it spells "Tod-dog," or "death"-dog. "Dog" in reverse spells "god." Therefore, Vladimir's song at the beginning of Act II, "And dug the dog a tomb," alludes to the death of god. The word "Godot" thus embodies a coexistence of opposites: mortality and immortality, becoming and being, thought and

pure consciousness. While God may seem to exist only as a possibility just beyond the tramps' reach, the mystery, if not the real nature, of Godot is always at hand. As Mark Taylor puts it, "the death of God is not a simple negation but a complex process in which the divine becomes incarnate when the profane is grasped as sacred" (189). As a coexistence of opposites, the sacred is immanent in pure awareness, the ground of language and thought. The fact that the spectator is suspended between the poles of death and god is significant in preventing the mind from dwelling on any particular meaning or stagnating in its flow toward its own essential nature as witness beyond conceptuality, space-time, and subject/object duality. When Beckett says, "I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them.... It is the shape that matters" (qtd. in Calderwood 38), he points to something beyond thought or mental content, to the shape of awareness that impartially subsumes all phenomena. The more unified or unbounded the awareness, the more dispersed are the phenomena integrated by its wholeness.

The extent to which the play arrives to the spectator and, in turn, the spectator to the play, depends finally on the degree to which the actors and audience can detach themselves from the mind's activity. This relation (between play and audience) is the subject of the *Natyashastra*, the Indian treatise on dramaturgy, which holds (as suggested by Indian philosophy at large) that there are several levels of the mind involved in the transformation of an audience (Bharata Muni 1987). The term "mind," as distinct from pure consciousness, is used here in two senses: the overall levels of the mind on the one hand, and the thinking mind within that general structure on the other (Alexander et al., 290). In this definition, the overall levels of the mind comprise the senses, the thinking mind, the discriminating intellect, feeling or intuition, the individual ego, and pure consciousness. For the *Natyashastra*, aesthetic rapture (*rasa*, or "flavor of pure consciousness") affects the audience primarily through the emotional modes. These modes are not ordinary feelings but the permanent emotional modes (*sthayibhavas*) that correspond to aesthetic rapture (*rasa*) (Krishnamoorthy, *passim*). The actors whose performances evoke the strongest emotional response are the most effective. Since the emotions are closely linked with pure consciousness, the more the actors can tap into this silent witnessing faculty underlying the mind's activity, the more transformative the emotional impact of their performance. Godot surely does not arrive for the waiting audience if interpreted merely as a transcendental signified experienced conceptually through the thinking mind. But he possibly may arrive if interpreted aesthetically as an emotional flavor of the observ-

er knowing herself, in which case the attention would go beyond thought, in the direction of pure awareness. If Godot arrives, therefore, it most likely will be through the aesthetic rapture induced by the medium of Beckett's art, which is characterized by self-referral, gaps, pauses, and ever-repeated moments that precede activity. Ultimately, what happens in the play depends on the quality of the interaction between the actors and audience in each performance.

### DRAMA AND METALANGUAGE

To a postmodernist critic, *Waiting for Godot* has modernist overtones, and Godot himself represents a metanarrative that prevents the tramps from ever achieving the freedom they so desperately seek. Jeffrey Nealon argues that Estragon and Vladimir are tricksters engaged in a play of language games, that all their games point to one metagame—the grand narrative cantered on Godot—and that they are content to play their comfortable modernist games within this grand narrative rather than attempt to break out through a postmodernist misuse of language for the sake of progress and discovery (46–7). The best example of a postmodernist language game, for Nealon, is Lucky's "think," which transgresses and disrupts the limits of the ultimate metagame—namely, Western metaphysics. Lucky is right, of course, to deconstruct and expose the limits of objective thought:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda.... (28)

If the non-sense of Lucky's think takes him and perhaps the audience toward the far side of the limits of language, then Lucky may be said to have tasted the flavor of pure awareness. Lucky's think is not merely unreasonable or the opposite of reason, which would keep it within the dialectic of language as an aspect of thought experienced through the mind and intellect; rather, his think is trans-reasonable (Nealon 48) and, in a sense, transverbal (Wilber 117–29). But this does not mean simply that his think deconstructs the metaphysical/metalinguistic meaning of Godot as a mental construct, replacing it with another construct. It means, more importantly, that his think, by means of the aesthetic power of sug-



gestion, moves both the characters' and audience's attention beyond the conceptual and emotional content of the mind and toward the freedom of consciousness.

This process shows not only that language games resist being totalized by a metadiscourse, as the poststructuralists would say, but also that they can lead the mind beyond discursive thought altogether. Western metaphysics, or the supposed metagame of *Godot*, becomes a totalizing metadiscourse only when approached, as it usually is, theoretically—through the mind and intellect rather than phenomenologically. As a result, metaphysics in the Western tradition has become a grand narrative based on a grand misunderstanding. The postmodernist critique of metaphysical systems is really a critique of metaphysics as a concept rather than as a form of knowledge-by-identity beyond the duality of subject and object. This critical misunderstanding occurs because applied metaphysics, the movement beyond mental content toward awareness, is rare in the West outside of aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, for *Godot* to be a metagame, as Nealon claims he is, he would have to be a known or finite quantity; yet, in the play, he remains unknown and infinite. Even Beckett, when asked about the meaning of *Godot*, replied that, had he known, he would have told us in the play. Nealon notes that, as a truly postmodernist play, *Waiting for Godot* involves not the lack of meaning but an excess of meaning produced by the liberating play of language (51). Yet the deconstructive freeplay of language is liberating only in a finite sense; theoretically, it retreats within the boundaries of thought without giving access to the unboundedness of pure awareness, which it rejects as an illusion. To say that *Waiting for Godot* presents a totalizing modernist view in an infinite postmodernist world is therefore to intellectualize it, to (mis)identify consciousness with the activity of the thinking mind, and to belie the impact of Beckett's play as an aesthetic vehicle for transcending thought in the expansion of consciousness.

### ENDGAME

The aesthetic strategy of *Endgame* also shifts our attention from mind to consciousness, specifically from the subjectivity of the characters to our own subjectivity and beyond. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the characters come in symmetrical pairs and play a waiting game, in this case an "endgame" for the time of death. Hamm, a blind old man in his wheelchair, and Clov, his servant who can't sit down, wait in a claustrophobic shelter with Hamm's legless parents, Nagg and Nell, who live in dustbins. They live in the aftermath of a great calamity and seem to be the sole survivors in a world Clov describes as "Corpsed" (25). Once

rich and powerful, Hamm dominates and bullies Clov, who hates him and wants to leave. But to do so would be to commit both suicide and murder, for Hamm's larder contains the only remaining food that he would have to go without, and Hamm is completely dependent on him. As they wait for the impending end, Hamm, who considers himself a writer, picks up where he left off in the tale he has been telling about the catastrophe that destroyed the world. He recounts the incident of a man who came to beg for food for his starving child. By implication, the child was Clov, and Hamm rescued him and became his father, although the boy was too young to remember. The many others who also begged for help, such as his neighbor Mother Pegg, Hamm left to perish and now feels the burden of guilt. Clov refuses to listen to Hamm's tales any longer, so Hamm resorts to bribing his father into listening. He hates his imbecilic parents, and, in turn, Hamm's mother secretly urges Clov to leave him.

Hamm is childish, selfish, sensuous, self-pitying and plays with his three-legged toy dog, while Clov is rational and obsessed with order. Some critics believe they represent the conflicting elements of a single personality, or what Esslin calls a "monodrama" (66). The pun in Clov's name—clove, cleave; adhering, separating—allows for this ambiguity. As the desired but continually deferred end approaches, Clov, serving as Hamm's sense of sight, looks out the window one last time with his telescope and reports seeing what "Looks like a small boy" (50). He offers to go out and attack him, "A potential procreator," with the gaff, knowing that Hamm opposes any sign of continuing life, but Hamm restrains him: "If he exists he'll die there or he'll come here. And if he doesn't ..." (50). At this point, Hamm realizes that the end has come: "It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you anymore" (50). Clov finally decides to go: "I leave you.... There is nothing to say" (50). But, at the end of the play, he remains standing on the threshold: "*Enter Clov, dressed for the road. Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag. He halts by the door and stands there, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end*" (51–2). No departure, no resolution, no closure. *Endgame* famously ends where it begins, and begins where it ends, the first lines being Clov's tentative statement: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be finished" (12). But it never is.

In alluding to the end of the world and all of its content—objects, time, nature, food, colors, fleas, rats, weather, laughter, kisses, sun, sound, God, and so on—but infinitely deferring this end, *Endgame* suggests the possibility of experiencing a fusion of fullness and emptiness. Poststructuralists argue that the coales-

cence of beginnings and ends in the play proclaims our inability to reach the end of consciousness, of perceiving its nothingness (Hale 81). Hamm and Clov desire a stillness and immobility they can never attain, for the activity of the world never ceases. It seems they desire not so much to stop permanently the waves of activity, the natural activity of mind, but to locate an internal frame of reference for riding out the waves, which only pure consciousness can provide. Rather than conventional characterization and plot, *Endgame* concentrates on the core of human existence (Esslin 68; Henning 103). If Hamm and Clov represent the two halves of a single personality, then the core duality of human psychology is not the split between the rational/irrational, conscious/unconscious, emotion/intellect—all of which belong to the mind's material dimension. Rather, the human psyche's core duality is the split between mind and consciousness, qualia and witnessing awareness, or, as Sylvie Henning puts it, "mind and soul" (103). But, however we divide Hamm and Clov between these two aspects, they also embody, as individuals, separate instantiations of this ultimate duality within themselves. Metaphorically, the gradual encroachment of death in the world surrounding their shelter depicts the receding qualia of human experience in the "unknowing" process of being "awareness" itself. A knowledge-by-identity of the self beyond subject/object duality literally involves the forgetting of the material world, a virtual death that, according to the principles of Sankya-Yoga, includes the mind and intellect.

The end of material existence, therefore, does not entail the cessation of consciousness, as Jane Alison Hale suggests (81). Quite the reverse. She argues that the endgame's non-endings portray a stalemate or paradox found in all of Beckett's work: namely, "that consciousness can never attain a definitive end, because it would be unable to perceive the nothingness that it would meet there" (81). This may be true of the perceiving mind with its "knowledge-about" approach, which cannot fathom "the thing in itself," as Kant discerned, much less an ultimate nothingness. But consciousness does not know by perceiving; it knows through identifying. It would thus attain the definitive end of nothingness by being it, not by perceiving it. For the characters and audience, the pull toward nothingness is represented by the vision of emptiness all around the shelter, the corpsed, grey world of zero, and by the constant shifting of the characters' socially induced identities.

Can it be said that Hamm and Clov's not conforming to conventional models of character implies that identity is a socially constructed closure? Yes and no. As Gabriele Schwab observes, Hamm and Clov "don't seem to commit them-

selves to any psychic continuity as a basis for identity"; for, although they seem to manifest a conventional inner life, "as soon as one attempts to assemble these manifestations into some coherent notion of personality, the characters shift to a different level of self-presentation" (88). Schwab argues that *Endgame* prevents interpretive closure by inviting the reader to a symbolic interpretation and then opening the meaning out again through the characters' language games:

HAMM: We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that's a good one!" (27)

Later, Hamm questions whether he was ever present at the great calamity:

HAMM: Absent, always. It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened. [*Pause.*] Do you know what's happened? [*Pause.*] Clov!...

CLOV: What for Christ's sake does it matter?" (47)

Schwab notes that, in *Endgame*, the double-meaning structure of language breaks down (91). Typically, the lack of surface meaning sends us to look for a latent, symbolic meaning. Yet the overabundance of the signifier in the play not only precludes a manifest meaning but even renders a latent meaning suspect. Beckett thus warns us, "Beware of symbols" (qtd. in Schwab 88). As Schwab rightly concludes, the dialectic of closure and opening in the drama is an aesthetic device through which we transgress the limits of our ego-identities. But, in concluding that the play expands the "boundaries of our consciousness in two directions: towards the unconscious and towards self-reflection" (97), he follows the conventional wisdom of mistaking consciousness for mind, of seeing the ultimate structure of the self in the conscious/unconscious duality.<sup>1</sup> The void of meaningfulness induced by the play of the signifier, however, would not lead to the unconscious mind, a field of conceptual content but, rather, toward quality-less pure awareness. The former still allows for totalization, or closure, while the latter is a nothingness beyond closure—the fullness of emptiness. Hence, to answer our question: Hamm and Clov's not conforming to the conventional models of character implies that identity is a socially induced closure in terms of mind that is fully open in terms of consciousness.

Hamm's inability to finish his chronicle, which Clov considers a farce and Nagg would rather not listen to (35), illustrates the endless flow of thought and time. Hamm: "I'll soon have finished with this story. [*Pause.*] Unless I bring on

other characters" (37). Recounting the liminal phase of his life during the great calamity ("All those I might have helped"; 44), Hamm's story blends into his present life and renders story and life almost indistinguishable. To him, they are equally real, or unreal, as he was "Absent, always." In the endless repetition of his story we see the inadequacy of language as a means of becoming aware of the self, communicating with others, or comprehending reality. The process of renewal and destruction experienced through time frustrates the desire for closure in the outer realm of life. At best, this process may purge the troubling contents of the spectators' minds, releasing them from the deadening habits of thought and language and from the fears and anxieties caused by duality as well as providing a glimpse of a non-dual reality beyond. But, just as Clov cannot escape from Hamm's oppressive realm, so each of us, Beckett seems to imply, cannot escape our temporal existence. Each must find a balance between boundaries and freedom, ratiocination and witnessing awareness. *Endgame* points to witnessing consciousness through the unending quest for escape; as an unanalyzable state of being, we know it only through a priori intimations of inner experience.<sup>2</sup>

The original French version of *Endgame* gives more attention to the turning point of the play when Clov sees the small boy through the telescope. Hamm asks, "What is he looking at?" and Clov replies, "His navel" (qtd. in Esslin 72). "[L]ike Buddha," Esslin observes, "the little boy contemplates his navel ... the great emptiness of nirvana, nothingness, of which Democritus the Abdrite has said, in one of Beckett's favourite quotations, 'Nothing is more real than nothing'" (73). Esslin allows that nothingness also may refer more concretely to the coming of death but concludes that it doesn't matter; it's best not to pursue interpretive closure, for to fix on any one alternative would "only impair the simulating coexistence of these and other possible implications" (74). But, however many implications there may be, the emptiness of full awareness pervades them all. Even in the English version of the play, as I have shown, the images of endless repetition, nothingness, and non-closure of identity also suggest the openness of pure awareness.

## CONCLUSION

Beckett deconstructs ordinary perceptual frameworks, but the effect of his plays is not merely to reveal the lack of stability or firmness in the ordinary processes of thought and perception. A constructivist (or poststructuralist) would see his drama as a representation within a cultural context that produces certain

conceptual effects, while the decontextualist (or perennial psychologist) would see it as a means of eliminating cultural constructs, as a letting go or forgetting of conceptual categories altogether in a move toward pure awareness. A post-structuralist interpretation of these plays deconstructs their cultural categories to expose their relative or non-universal nature and, therefore, their lack of priority over other categories. A decontextualist interpretation, on the other hand, would see that cultural categories, like those undermined in these plays, have their practical advantages but, when identified with exclusively, can impede access to the innate capacity to be aware of awareness.

The combined forces in each of Beckett's plays inaugurate a transformation of consciousness of each subject involved, but they do so within a political context. In this sense, the perlocutionary force of language and performance further obscures the boundary between art and life. The performative and its meaning are inextricably related to context; and context, like consciousness, contains meaning but does not permit saturation. Social and aesthetic domains overlap considerably, with the aesthetic's not being confined to high art but, rather, pervading the drama of living. By uncovering the social forces behind the production of literary meaning, cultural studies does not displace transcultural truths or aesthetic values but, rather, discovers them at the very heart of popular culture.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a recent essay in the *New York Review of Books*, "Freud Under Analysis" (November 4, 1999), Colin McGinn makes a convincing argument against the existence of repression and the unconscious.

<sup>2</sup> In *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*, Colin McGinn makes a similar case for the good: "The property of goodness is part of plain common sense, not a piece of speculative parascience or religious metaphysics. It is also unanalyzable in any non-moral terms, though it may well be analyzable by using other terms from the moral family—'ought' or 'right,' say" (31–2). Similarly, as with consciousness and thought or language, "The concept of goodness is prior to judgements of goodness; so there is no prospect of reversing the order of dependence and saying that goodness is to be explicated in terms of moral judgement" (19).

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